

***Minutes of the Housing, Community, Corporate and Cultural Strategic Policy
Committee meeting held on the 26th June 2017 at 11.00am in the Council
Chambers, County Buildings, Mullingar.***

Presiding:

Cllr. Ken Glynn.

Members Present:

Cllr. Frankie Keena, Cllr. Michael O'Brien,
Cllr. Andrew Duncan, Mr. Des Sheridan.

Executive Present:

David Hogan Director of Service, Hugh
O'Reilly SEO, Miriam Mulrennan Arts
Officer, Paula O'Dornan, A/Co. Librarian.

1. Minutes of Strategic Policy Committee meeting held on 13th March, 2017

The minutes of the SPC meeting held on 13th March 2017 were adopted on the proposal of Cllr. Glynn.

2. Any Matters Arising

None

3. Housing Strategy Update.

David Hogan provided update on the following Housing Issues:

- Contracts have been signed for the construction of 9 houses at St. Laurence's Tce., Mullingar;
- The contract for the construction of a replacement dwelling at Ennell Court, Mullingar has also been signed;
- 11 houses have been acquired by the council so far this year, with a further 8 acquisitions in progress and a further 9 agreed for purchase, with the aim of acquiring approximately 40-50 houses in 2017 throughout the county;
- The toilet facilities at Blackberry Lane, Athlone have been upgraded;
- The re-zoning of council lands which are considered suitable for social housing is ongoing and will be included on the agenda for the Sept. council meeting;
- LIHAF funding for the Brawney lands in Athlone has been obtained. The funding will allow the construction of a link road to the Garrycastle junction and open Council lands for housing development;

- Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) is continuing with 131 applicants signed up to the scheme in the year to-date with an average of 10 applicants signing up now each week;
- A total of 588 RAS contracts and 241 leasing contracts in place;
- There are currently 17 people in emergency accommodation in the county and there is a provisional budget of €880,000 for the Midland region to fund emergency accommodation such as B&Bs;
- Housing development at Arcadia, Athlone is awaiting stage 3 approval following submission to the Department of Housing, Planning & Local Government.

Cllr. Keena questioned the application process for the Arcadia development and whether the delay was unique to the Arcadia development. David Hogan responded that the development was submitted for stage 3 approval which is part of a 4 stage approval in early April and that there had been a similar delay at stage 2 of the process. He confirmed that the Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government intends to review the 4 stage process. Cllr. O'Brien asked when the development was expected to begin works and Mr Hogan responded that that it was hoped work would commence on site towards the end of the year.

Cllr. Keena expressed concern about whether residents near the proposed road in Brawney, Garrycastle, Athlone had been consulted regarding the route of the road and asked how much of the land is the property of Westmeath County Council. Mr. Hogan responded that the Council and the Housing Agency own a significant landbank in the area and consultation will take place with all interested parties in due course;

Cllr. Ken Glynn questioned the current requirements for the tenant purchase scheme and the low number of tenants who are eligible for the tenant purchase scheme. David Hogan responded that a review of the scheme is proposed but the original scheme remains in place.

Cllr. O'Brien asked about where the planned housing acquisitions would be. David Hogan responded that the majority of acquisitions would be in Mullingar and Athlone with smaller numbers of acquisitions in other areas.

Mr. Des Sheridan asked about the number of vacant properties in Westmeath available to Westmeath County Council and whether derelict sites could be recovered for social housing. David Hogan responded that there are a number of schemes available to facilitate bringing vacant houses back into use such as the repair and leasing scheme or the buy and renew scheme.

Cllr. Duncan expressed concern that the vacant housing levels were lower than thought and that most property in Mullingar is at least 10 years old with few properties built in recent years.

Cllr. Ken Glynn questioned what is involved in the development of Ennell Court. David Hogan replied that individual houses in Ennell Court have gradually been upgraded over the past number of years but the focus is now on making use of the available land through a Masterplan for the area. Given the existing density and the areas proximity to the town centre and the railway station, there is significant opportunities to develop the area further.

4. Libraries Ireland: makes every library your local library

Paula O'Dornan gave a presentation on the new book exchange system between all national libraries which enables a library user of any library to request an item from any other library if it is not available locally.

Cllr. O'Brien commended the scheme and asked if a library card for one library could be used in all other national libraries. Ms. O'Dornan confirmed that any library's card could be used to borrow books from any library.

Cllr. Keena enquired about the logistics of moving the books between libraries and whether books borrowed from one library could be returned to any other library. Ms. O'Dornan outlined the courier system for transport of books and sorting at a central depot which enables books to be returned to any library and transported back to the library in which they belong.

5. Presentation on Creative Ireland

Miriam Mulrennan gave a presentation on the work of Creative Ireland which awards grants for events and creative projects in communities in Westmeath.

Cllr. Glynn commended the work of Creative Ireland across all of Westmeath.

Cllr. O'Brien highlighted the importance of Creative Ireland in supporting events in locations such as Athlone Castle for the benefit of local people.

Des Sheridan commended the emphasis on creative community projects rather than individual projects.

Cllr. Keena commended the promotion of Westmeath both nationally and internationally while Cllr. Duncan commented on the diversity of the type of groups supported by Creative Ireland.

6. Presentation by Irish Green Building Council

Pat Barry gave a brief presentation on the Irish Green Building Council and their Home Performance Index which rates houses based on costs, well-being of occupants and impact on the planet.

Cllr. Duncan asked about the availability of grants similar to renewable energy grants to retrofit existing housing stock and private houses to the standards of the Home Performance Index outlined. Pat Barry referred to reports which call for greater energy efficiency in housing and that the SEAI is gradually moving towards encouraging a deeper renovation of houses efficiency.

7. Any Other Business

Cllr. O'Brien raised the issue of fire safety standards in social housing and private properties in which council tenants live following the fire at the Grenfell Tower in London. Cllr. O'Brien particularly referred to the issue of fire safety standards of apartment blocks in which there are council tenants. David Hogan responded that a circular had been issued by the

Department of Housing calling for the inspection of high rise properties which are used for social housing; these are defined as properties which are at least 5 stories high. He also replied that Westmeath County Council has been directed to write to any landlords of high-rise properties housing council tenants to confirm that the buildings comply with building regulations.

Cllr. Keena questioned the type of external insulation being used in works on council-owned property and what materials the external insulation is made from and whether these materials would produce toxic gases if they caught alight. Cllr. Glynn also asked whether similar external insulation cladding to that used on Grenfell Tower had been used in on any council properties. David Hogan responded that all materials used on houses owned by Westmeath County Council meet the required building standards.

Cllr. Keena also asked whether Westmeath County Council can insist on action being taken in a rented property which is not deemed to meet fire standards. David Hogan replied that the Council carry out random inspections of rented properties on behalf of the PRTB to ensure they comply with the minimum standards for rented properties but these inspections are not carried out by a fire safety professional.

Des Sheridan also raised the topic of the advice of the fire warden in situations in which a high-rise building is on fire and whether the advice would be to stay in the property as it was in the case of Grenfell Tower. David Hogan responded that that would be an issue best addressed at the SPC meeting for Environment, Water and Emergency Services which was supported by Cllr. Keena.

This concluded the business of the meeting.


Chairperson

18/9/17
Date